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TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE:

INTO THE UNCHARTED TERRITORY OF STAND-UP COMEDY TRANSLATION FROM ENGLISH TO ITALIAN

CANDIDATO   **RELATORE**

Erika Annarumma   Dr. Anthony Dion Mitzel

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Primo Appello

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ABSTRACT

Stand-up comedy is a unique comedic style that is strictly related to the context in which it is delivered. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the major difficulties one can face when translating stand-up comedy monologues from English to Italian, using examples from popular Netflix specials. Being heavily reliant on the live performance and culturally specific, language-bound content, stand-up comedy humour can be more difficult to translate than any other comedic form. This thesis attempts to present the genre of stand-up comedy and examine the challenges of maintaining the comedic effect of the original monologues while avoiding potential humour loss in the translation process.

INTRODUCTION

Stand-up comedy may seem like a simple art form at first glance, but there is much more to it than meets the eye. While at its core it is all about a comedian sharing their unique perspectives with their audience, this comic style is made of many layers, each contributing to its richness and appeal, and each acting as a vehicle for social commentary, self-expression, and the exploration of human experiences. Through their unique points of view and storytelling abilities, comedians invite audiences to see the world from a different angle and to take a break from their daily routines.

As this genre is gaining global popularity, also thanks to the distribution of shows on streaming platforms such as Netflix, the demand has arisen to make these products available in more languages, in order to make them accessible to a wider audience. This thesis intends first and foremost to look at a form of comic entertainment that has not yet received much attention from humour and translation studies and is not widely popular in Italy. By providing examples from Netflix specials of well-established comedians, this thesis explores the realm of stand-up comedy translation from English to Italian.

The first section offers an overview of stand-up comedy, humour, and translation. It delves into the characteristics of stand-up comedy, including its reliance on relatability and trust, the importance of liveness, and its inherent nature as a form of rhetorical argument. Additionally, this section examines the challenges faced when translating humour, on and off screen, as well as the translatability of jokes. It also focuses on the role of subtitles in conveying cultural and linguistic features while preserving the original humour.

The second section deals with content-related translation challenges and examines the techniques used to translate culturally specific humour. Specifically, it explores the approaches employed to render cultural references that are shared between the source and target cultures, those that are not shared, and those that have become shared due to the impact of globalization on entertainment.

In the third and final section, language-related translation challenges are discussed. This section concerns the translation of language-bound humour and presents the strategies used for rendering language-play – including puns, wordplay, and idioms – from English into Italian.

In conclusion, the purpose of this thesis is to deepen our understanding of the strategies used by subtitlers when translating stand-up comedy. By analysing linguistic and cultural elements in stand-up comedy monologues and exploring both content- and language-related translation

challenges, this thesis takes into consideration the complexities of rendering humour across languages and cultures.

1 STAND-UP COMEDY, HUMOUR AND TRANSLATION

1.1 STAND-UP COMEDY

According to Encyclopaedia Britannica (Zoglin, 2023), stand-up comedy is "comedy that generally is delivered by a solo performer speaking directly to the audience in some semblance of a spontaneous manner". The comedian usually performs in front of a live audience, speaking to them through a microphone and standing on a stage, hence the name "stand-up" comedy. A stand-up comedy routine consists of one-liners, stories and observations that comedians need to craft creatively and originally in order to be successful in their delivery. This unique art form is characterized by its liveness, the intimate relationship between the audience and the performer and the authority established by the comedian, as well as the crucial roles played by both the cultural and linguistic context in which it is performed.

1.1.1 The role of relatability and trust

Stand-up comedy is an art form that revolves around engaging the audience through the use of anecdotes and monologues based on references and personal experiences that the audience finds relatable. Indeed, a good comedian has the talent to find comedic material in every aspect of life and portray relatable subjects and routines in a way that the audience can appreciate and laugh at (Schwarz, 2010). Comedians should refer to images and associations with which they know their audience is familiar, making it possible for the audience to relate to their persona, thus establishing a connection with them. To deliver an entertaining and funny performance, comedians need to connect with the audience on a personal level, which is sometimes complicated as the individuals attending the performance may be very different from one another. It is most likely that the audience of a stand-up comedy performance will be very heterogeneous, meaning that it will be composed of different age groups and each member will have their own background, opinions, and experiences. As a result, stand-up comedians will have achieved their purpose in their performance whenever they will be able to reduce the gap between them and the audience, thus using their personal stories to establish a relationship with their listeners and create a sense of intimacy.

To prevent the audience from not being able to understand the jokes and the humour itself, performers should work on being relatable as well as trustworthy. Indeed, stand-up comedians' humour may succeed or fail based on whether the audience trusts the comedian (Abrahams, 2020), which is influenced by the audience's perception of the comedian and their familiarity

with them. For the humour act to be comprehended, the audience must trust that the humourist is joking: clearly, as in the case of stand-up comedy the performance occurs in an institutionalized environment, comedians will automatically have more trust about whether they are joking as they are expected to be funny. Therefore, the success of a comedic performance relies on the relationship established between the comedian and their audience, who is always the arbiter of what constitutes humour. The most skilled comedians excel at fostering this connection by showcasing their expertise in crafting jokes while also earning the audience's trust in their intentions and capabilities.

1.1.2 The importance of liveness

Stand-up comedy is inextricably entwined with the live performance and both sides – the audience and the comedian – recognize that this is an integral part of stand-up comedy (Rutter, 1997). Indeed, a stand-up routine is not simply a one-sided performance delivered by a comedian and passively consumed by viewers. Rather, it is a dynamic and collaborative moment resulting from the interactions and negotiations between all the individuals present both onstage and offstage (Mills, 2011). As the audience is allowed to participate and interact with the comedian, liveness and authenticity are key elements in stand-up comedy. The comic discourse is inevitably less tightly scripted and more reliant on improvisation; the effectiveness itself of the comic discourse depends on the comedian's ability to adapt it when interacting with the audience (Greenbaum, 1999). One can affirm indeed that liveness is one of the main attractions of stand-up comedy: as the only aspect of the performance the comedian can control is the preparation and rehearsal of the material, every performance will have its unique characteristics. Therefore, liveness is what distinguishes stand-up comedy from other comedic forms and acts (Rutter, 1997).

1.1.3 Stand-up comedy as a form of rhetorical argument

As Greenbaum points out (1999, p. 33), since stand-up comedy seeks both to entertain and persuade, it is "an inherently rhetorical discourse". Comedians can only be successful in keeping their audience engaged and provoking laughter when they manage to convince their audience to look at the world through their comic vision, thus establishing themselves as comic and rhetorical authorities. In order to do this, throughout their performance, comedians employ rhetorical strategies. As the audience feedback is immediate, comedians need to work on the way they present themselves and their humour act to the audience. According to Greenbaum, a comedian must create a comic authority, a persona, which is able to make the audience respond

to their performance by laughing. To position themselves as comic authorities, first comedians need to establish their comic persona as relatable, likeable and, overall, not hostile.

Cicero himself in *De Oratore* states that humour can help establish a connection with the audience and make a speaker appear more approachable and easier to relate to, thus improving the receptiveness of the audience to the message being conveyed. In many ways, Cicero's perception of humour is still relevant today and can be applied to modern-day humour and stand-up comedy. For the purpose of this thesis, it is useful to notice that stand-up comedians regularly employ both types of wit identified in his treatise (1942): wit employed upon words, i.e., a wit of form, and wit employed upon facts, i.e., a wit of matter. A witty saying that has its point in facts consists in telling a tale or some anecdote, which is a core aspect of stand-up comedy, while a witty saying has its point in the clever use of words. Throughout their stand-up routines, comedians combine and alternate the narration of personal anecdotes and stories with the use of wordplays and puns. Following the classification of witticisms, a joke's humour is based on facts, namely its content, if it maintains its wit regardless of the words used to express it; otherwise, if by changing the words the humour is lost, then it is employed upon words. Both forms of wit are essential to deliver effective monologues and jokes, though "people are most particularly amused whenever laughter is excited by the union of the two". This principle is extremely accurate when it comes to stand-up comedy as the entirety of the performance relies on storytelling and the use of comic language.

1.2 HUMOUR

Defining humour is possibly more difficult than creating humour per se. It may be described as a social practice that focuses on entertaining others and evoking laughter (Abrahams, 2020) but it would not cover all its facets. Humour is indeed a complex and intricate subject that has attracted the interest of scholars from a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy. The appeal of humour lies in its paradoxical nature: while on one hand it is universal and can be found among all cultures, on the other hand, it is also extremely relative and culturally specific, heavily conditioned by time and space and deeply connected to the idiosyncratic cultural roots of a society (Rollo, 2014). Though, even people who share the same culture and live in the same place might not find the same subjects humorous. Humour is indeed also subjective and personal, yet laughter is a collective experience that is elicited when more than one individual share common knowledge and that is capable of building a sense of community. Being such a multifaceted topic, closely related to all the codes (e.g., cultural and

linguistic) shared between the humour generator and the audience, humorous content is most likely one of the most problematic to deal with when translating. This thesis will primarily focus on humour that is expressed verbally, namely verbal humour.

1.2.1 The challenges of translating humour on and off screen

Translation is generally defined as the process of changing the words of one language into the words of another language that have the same meaning, though when it comes to rendering verbal humour, audiovisual translators need to come to terms with a wide range of problems in order to stay true to the original meaning and make the translated humorous instance sound natural. When rendering audiovisual content, one not only has to deal with the usual complexities of translation (and humour translation) but also with the "intrinsic hurdles of AVT modes" (Martínez Sierra, 2020, p. 179). Translators who are tasked with the challenge of rendering humour into a different language must also consider technical factors, such as time constraints; in the case of stand-up comedy, it is also important that the target audience laughs at the same points as the live audience. Moreover, translators must strive to convey the intended meaning and effect of the original text while also taking into account the cultural and linguistic differences between the source and target languages. Indeed, all translators face the issue of dealing with lingua-cultural specificity, but by nature verbal humour "exploits linguistic ambiguity to extremes, often combining it with highly specific cultural references" (Chiaro, 2010, p. 2), thus further complicating the translator's job. A more suitable definition for translation with regard to this matter would be the one of Hatim and Mason (1997, p. 1), who describe the process as "an act of communication which attempts to relay, across cultural and linguistic boundaries, another act of communication". It follows from this definition that translation is more of an adaptation process that seeks to convey a message across cultural and linguistic divides. As Chiaro (2005, p. 135) argues "One of the most fascinating issues in both Humour Studies (HS) and Translation Studies (TS) must surely be whether or not, and if so, how far, humorous discourse, which is naturally impeded by linguistic and social barriers, actually succeeds in crossing geographical frontiers."

Since humour and the entire question of what people find humorous is extremely culture-bound and jokes based upon words are inextricably related to the structure of the given language (Chiaro, 2000), ideally only universal humour – which does not include any particular socio-cultural references – can be transferred into other languages without significant challenges, but humour rarely has universal features on a practical level. Indeed, the reason why translation is

needed in the first place is that every culture has its characteristics and, as every language is different, full equivalence between two languages is fundamentally impossible (Jakobson, 1959). Gottlieb (1994, p. 265) even asserts that for audiovisual content "the notion of equivalent translation is an illusory ideal". Equivalence is one of the two fundamental tenets of translation theory that translators have to deal with when rendering humorous discourse into another language, followed by (un)translatability (Chiaro, 2017). To effectively convey humorous content, translators need to conceive creative approaches to overcome cultural barriers and extend the purpose of audiovisual humour beyond its original context. For this reason, scholars generally agree that in the case of humour in audiovisuals a functional approach (Vermeer, 1996) should be adopted, thus sacrificing the formal equivalence (e.g., lexical choices and grammatical structure) of the original monologue or joke. Translators should focus on the purpose of the humorous audiovisual content, which is to elicit laughter. The translation of an instance can be considered a success only if recipients can perceive the humorous intent of the target humour, even if it alters the source's verbal humour in its semantic core (Bucaria, 2017).

1.2.2   On the classification of (un)translatable jokes

Jokes are an essential component of stand-up comedy monologues, providing the foundation for much of the humour in these performances. Though, jokes are not limited to the stage, they are also a pervasive and integral part of the humour of our daily lives. Collins English Dictionary (2023) defines a joke simply as "something that is said or done to make you laugh", but throughout stand-up comedy routines, jokes become a powerful tool for comedians to entertain and engage with their audience while conveying their message in a witty and impactful way. In the context of this thesis, it is interesting to explore how translators generally handle jokes as, since they fall into the category of verbally expressed humour, they can present numerous hurdles. Yus (2016) identifies three main approaches to joke translation:

1. *Transferable jokes*, which are easy to translate due to their universally valid social information, similar joke structures, and linguistic strategies for generating humour.
2. *Replaceable jokes*, which contain cultural references present in both the source and target cultures. Although the linguistic sources of humour may differ, alternatives can be found in the target language that achieve similar cognitive effects, even if one has to alter linguistic faithfulness.

3. *Challenging jokes*, which create significant difficulties in translation due to their highly specific intra-cultural referents and linguistic resources that lack equivalents in the target language.

Yus's classification illustrates that not all jokes are equally difficult to translate. Even within the category of transferable jokes, some may be easier to render than others. Also, a joke that is transferable into one language may not be easily translated into another. The difficulty degree varies depending on how culturally specific the joke is and how much it relies on the words of the source language. In this regard, Raphaelson-West (1989) argues that in the case of similar languages and cultures, a successful translation is often achievable. As a result, the feasibility of an effective translation depends on the proximity of the source and target cultures and the formal similarities between the two languages. The greater the difference in culture and language between the source and target, the more complicated it will be for translators to find a successful translation solution. In most cases, finding an equivalent in the target language that perfectly transfers the humour of the original joke into the target language will be almost impossible. Sometimes jokes may even seem untranslatable, but "if you keep in mind that the translation will not always be as humorous as the original" (Raphaelson-West, 1989, p. 140) and understand that "any translation is an adaptation of the original message to a culture outside the original speech community" (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 269), humour translation will always be feasible thanks to the several strategies available.

1.3 SUBTITLING

Subtitling is one of the two most widespread modalities adopted for translating audiovisual products. It can be defined as translation "in the form of one or more lines of written text presented on the screen in sync with the original dialogue" (Gottlieb, 2004, p. 220). Subtitling has become an essential tool for facilitating cross-cultural communication and understanding, as the demand for audiovisual content in multiple languages has been growing enormously. However, despite being a commonly employed translation method, it presents numerous challenges: along with translating spoken words from one language to another, subtitlers also have to transfer the dialogue from the seemingly unpredictable spoken language to the more structured and rigid written language. Indeed, subtitlers must balance the need to convey the meaning and tone of the original dialogue with the constraints of space and time, while also taking into account cultural differences and sensitivities.

1.3.1 Subtitles as linguistic and cultural features conveyors

Stand-up comedy translation is an example of audiovisual translation that differs from the one of multimedia content like films and TV series in the indispensable role that the word plays in the product. While it is true that the comedian's expressivity and delivery are important for the correct communication of humour, word is the bedrock of comic monologues and jokes, which are often based on puns and realia. Indeed, the word remains the vehicle "where meaning has to be conveyed across a linguistico-cultural divide" (Taylor, 2000, p. 154). Since subtitling is the method of audiovisual translation that most evidently relies on language, it is most likely the ideal approach to use to render stand-up comedy performances, where it is the verbal element that is altered and where it is the "creative crafting of words that carries the meaning".

Given the fact that the main purpose of audiovisual products is to sell, it is necessary to make sure that the message gets through to the audience, hence the reason why when it comes to translating audiovisual content, the strategy tends to be particularly user-friendly. As the target audience is presumably not able to understand the source language (that is spoken by the comedian in this case), the screen translator should try to give "the target audience the experience they would have had if they already knew the foreign language in question" (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 265) and "if they already understood the source culture" (Taylor, 2000, p. 154). The strategy of making the translation more target-oriented is known in translation as *localisation*, which is the process of adapting a product or content and customising it to meet the language and cultural features of a particular community (e.g., a country). Though, as Taylor (2000) argues, localising a product too much may not always be wise since the product's appeal to it often depends on it being not local. Using an approach that is not completely user-oriented can also be edifying to an audience in terms of transcultural transmission, thus allowing "the source culture to shine through and not be transformed or neutralised by translation" (2000, p. 163). It is fundamental for subtitlers to let the comedians' culture and identity stand out in their acts since excessively localising the translation might undermine the originality and the personal nature of stand-up comedy performances. Moreover, localisation is not always possible in stand-up comedy, as sometimes, for instance, to maintain the humour of a joke about a particular subject, such as a product, subtitles must include the actual name of the product as well as any acronyms or other references to it.

1.3.2   Subtitles as stand-up comedy humour preservers

Italy is a prevalently dubbing country and, unlike other nations, it appears less likely to switch to the subtitling practice (Audissino, 2012). Dubbing has been employed in Italy for a long time due to various reasons such as protectionism policies and the aim to preserve the Italian language from foreign influences. However, stand-up comedy, which has its origins in the United States and is more popular in anglophone countries than in Italy, undergoes the subtitling process. While there is still an ongoing debate within the field of audiovisual translation studies regarding the most effective methods for translating audiovisual products, it is evident that when it comes to stand-up comedy performances distributed by streaming services and television, other translation techniques are not ideal. Indeed, in the context of rendering stand-up comedy products for a global audience, the use of subtitles emerges as the only viable option. As opposed to other forms of audiovisual translation such as dubbing or voice-over, subtitling allows the original audio track and language delivery to be preserved, thus enabling the audience to experience the nuances of the comedian's performance, such as timing and intonation, while reading the translated version of the humour act. Indeed, whereas dubbing is defined as a "substitutional mode", subtitling can be described as a "supplementary mode" (Gottlieb, 2004, p. 222), because it does not prevent the audience from hearing the original audio. Subtitling ensures that the text captions displayed on the screen are an accurate representation of the comedian's original script. Moreover, subtitling is essential in stand-up comedy as even the slightest change in language-play or cultural reference can alter the joke's meaning and impact. Besides the communicative aspect, the economic one should also be taken into consideration: the dubbing process is undoubtedly more time-consuming and expensive, thus making it a less practical approach to render this genre that releases new content frequently. Subtitling indeed provides a flexible and cost-effective solution to translate stand-up comedy products, whose popularity and distribution have been rapidly increasing, and makes them accessible to a wider audience.

In the case of stand-up comedy, verbal humour content is not only anchored visually or acoustically (Bucaria, 2017), but it also depends on the response of the live audience. Stand-up comedy almost completely relies on the language used by the comedian, meaning that if subtitlers are not able to render the funniness of a joke, viewers who do not understand the language spoken will find themselves confused by the laughter of the audience attending the performance. Therefore, as only subtitlers can convey the humour to the broad audience of stand-up comedy performances internationally distributed, they should focus on maintaining

the verbal humour's invariant core, i.e., the basic ingredients of the humorous instance (Chiaro, 2017).

The upcoming sections will be dedicated to further exploring the issue of translating humour in stand-up comedy routines, particularly focusing on jokes that contain culturally specific and language-bound content. In this regard, the translation strategies employed to render Netflix stand-up comedy specials will be analysed.

2 CONTENT-RELATED TRANSLATION CHALLENGES

2.1 CULTURE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

The second section of this thesis will deal with the pivotal role of culture in the translation of stand-up comedy. As previously mentioned in the first section, humour and translation are closely intertwined with culture, and this relationship becomes particularly evident within the context of stand-up comedy since comedians rely heavily on culturally specific content to build their monologues. This is a natural outcome because, like everyone else, their individual identity and sense of humour are shaped by their cultural backgrounds and the environment they live or have been living in most of their lives. Therefore, it becomes apparent the reason why comedians usually draw upon their personal experiences and anecdotes to craft monologues and jokes that the audience will find humorous. Finding the right blend of universal and specific humour is crucial for connecting with diverse audiences while still maintaining a unique comedic voice.

2.1.1 Comedian's representations as collective representations

Cultural factors are crucial when creating a stand-up comedy monologue because it is impossible to purposely joke about something one simply does not know or understand. Indeed, for a joke to be genuinely funny, it is not sufficient for comedians to have a passing familiarity with the topic. This concept clearly works both ways, because the audience will not be able to find humour in a topic that they are unfamiliar with or cannot relate to. However, relatability is not only determined by the degree of familiarity of the audience with a given topic, but it is also inevitably influenced by linguistic, individual, and cultural factors. Indeed, performances of stand-up comedians include culture-bound monologues or short jokes (Yus, 2016) either rich in wordplays or based on personal opinions, experiences and perspectives on current events or social issues, hence the strong connection between the art of stand-up comedy and their individuality and culture. The Italian stand-up comedian Daniele Tinti defines stand-up comedy as "a stand, a microphone and a *different* point of view" (2022), thus emphasising how personal this type of comedy is, both in the way it is narrated and in the way it is assembled and presented to the audience. Though, as Yus argues in his book, in a way, comedians have to "predict which information will cross-cut the audience's cognitive environments" (2016, p. 158) as each member of the audience has their own set of mental and cultural representations. The comedian's words enhance these cognitive environments, providing a linguistic context for the

audience to evaluate their own cultural and personal beliefs and spreading new cultural assumptions.

It follows that it is essential for comedians who want to succeed in delivering their humour and connecting with their audience to have a deep understanding of their cultural background and to play on shared background knowledge. One of the principal factors contributing to the comic appeal of stand-up comedy is indeed the audience's realization that numerous representations of the world that they believed to be exclusively their own are in fact shared cultural representations held by many individuals. When an audience laughs, they collectively recognize that the issues being presented are shared and manifest to everyone, thus building a sense of cultural unity and mutual understanding. For this to happen and for the audience to recognize the wittiness of the comedian's jokes and question their own view of the world, the audience needs to be familiar with the cultural references in the monologue in the first place. A stand-up comedy monologue will be indeed successful if the comedian is able to joke on familiar topics and shared experiences, such as family dynamics, social stereotypes, or everyday problems.

2.1.2   The translation of culture-bound content in stand-up routines

Since humour, translation and culture are so closely related, translating stand-up comedy into another language can be extremely challenging. Translators who do not share the same cultural background with the comedians may struggle to render given parts of the monologues, especially when they are unfamiliar with the realia mentioned. And even if translators can recognize these references, they must consider the fact that the Italian audience may not have the same level of familiarity. The core aspect of stand-up comedy translation is to maintain the humour and comedic impact of the original routine while taking into consideration the possible "culture bumps". Indeed, translators should strive not to impoverish the target humorous instances nor leave the audience puzzled at anomalies resulting from unexplained realia (Leppihalme, 1992). Any italophone Netflix user who does not recognize the references the comedians make during their show will not be able to bond and relate with their comic persona, thus not recognizing them as comic authorities. This will also result in the loss of humour and the absence of laughter, thus failing to achieve the primary goal of stand-up comedy.

2.2 TYPES OF CULTURAL REFERENCES AND TRANSLATION STRATEGIES

As culture-specificity is part and parcel of stand-up comedy, translators need to come to terms with the fact that it is a crucial element in the import and export of the product. When

encountering culturally specific content in the analysis of stand-up comedy monologues and subtitling, three distinct macro groups have emerged:

1. Shared cultural references.
2. Unshared cultural references.
3. Shared cultural references because of globalization.

It was evident that the difficulty of translating cultural references is higher when they are not shared by the source and target culture, as this often leads to potential incongruities. Generally, the more culturally specific the instance of humour is, the more difficult the job of the translator becomes. In order to explore the challenges of stand-up comedy translation, the following sections will present as examples some monologues' extracts taken from Netflix specials.

2.2.1 Shared cultural references

Certain elements of humour are universally recognized and lead to similar subjects being joked about in most Western cultures, such as sex, underdogs and meanness (Chiaro, 2000). These subjects, as well as common stereotypes, can be funny and appealing to a broader audience, even when people come from different cultural backgrounds. When dealing with such instances of humour, translators have a relatively easier task as they can retain the comedic essence unaltered in the target language. This is the case of the following bit taken from Ken Jeong's show *You Complete Me, Ho* (Chu, 2019).

Source Text	Netflix Translation
I was a **general practitioner**, all right? We are the dumbest of all doctors, all right? Like, in general, we knew nothing. We're stupid, okay? Like, if a patient came up to me and said, "What do I have?" "Well, in general, you're sick, so I'll refer you to a specificist."	Ero un **medico generico**, ok? Siamo i più stupidi di tutti i medici, ok? Tipo, in generale, non sapevamo nulla. Tipo, se un paziente veniva da me e diceva: "Che ho?" "Beh, sei malato, quindi ti mando da uno specialista."

In this part of his monologue, Ken Jeong ironizes about the fact that general practitioners are generally considered to be lacking intelligence or expertise compared to doctors in specific medical fields because all they do is confirm that the patient is sick and needs to be seen by a specialist. Since in Italy there is the same stereotype about general practitioners, i.e., *medici di base* or *medici generici*, this joke is easily transferable and perfectly works both in the source language and in the target language (also on a linguistic level, as it maintains the wordplay).

2.2.2   Unshared cultural references

Although globalization has undoubtedly broadened cultural understanding and knowledge, unshared cultural references still exist due to cultural diversity, language barriers, and the dynamic nature of trends. However, cultural references that are not shared are not necessarily incomprehensible to the target culture. Indeed, while some realia-based jokes may require prior knowledge or familiarity with the subject, comedians often provide enough context or cues for the audience to understand and infer the intended humour. Of course, the degree of inferability varies depending on the specific cultural reference and the encyclopaedic knowledge of each audience member. Skilled comedians especially know how to deliver culture-bound jokes in a way that allows the audience to grasp the comedic elements without having direct knowledge of the topic. An example of this can be seen in Jack Whitehall's *I'm Only Joking* (Skinner & Waters, 2020).

Source Text	Netflix Translation
I was in the supermarket recently. Not **Waitrose**, or **Whole Foods**, before you start judging me. Sorry to disappoint, I am not doing Waitrose jokes.	Ero al supermercato di recente... Non **Waitrose** o **Whole Foods**, prima che iniziate a giudicarmi. Mi dispiace deludervi, non faccio battute su Waitrose.

Here, Whitehall makes a joke that relies on two realia of the English-speaking world, namely Waitrose and Whole Foods, two supermarket chains. Waitrose is a British supermarket known for its higher prices and reputation as a more upscale grocery store. Whole Foods, on the other hand, is an American supermarket chain selling high-quality and organic products. In this case, even if most of the Italian audience is not familiar with the realia mentioned by the comedian, it is easily inferable from his words (and the following bit) that shopping at these stores is usually associated with a certain level of pretentiousness and snobbery and, consequently, that it is not where "a man of the people" would go grocery shopping. In the translating process, it was chosen to maintain the cultural reference unchanged, which is probably the most used strategy when dealing with realia in stand-up comedy: indeed, within this genre, the translator cannot change the source text too much, because it is anchored to the live situation, the individuality of the comedian, and the context in general.

Though, this is just one of the several techniques translators may choose to apply when coming across cultural references. When possible, translators can also choose to bring the text closer to the target culture (*domestication*), instead of remaining loyal to the source text (*foreignization*),

thus inserting equivalent realia for the Italian audience; or again, they may opt for generalization, i.e., hypernyms or more general terms (Neshovska & Kitanovska-Kimovska, 2018), like in the following example taken from Sheng Wang's *Sweet and Juicy* (Wong, 2022). The joke revolves around Wang's attempt to lead a healthy lifestyle and save money by purchasing a top-of-the line juicer. He initially believes that juicing instead of buying ready-made juices would be a cost-effective solution, but he then realizes that the process is time-consuming and is not worth it.

Source Text	Netflix Translation
You get your dusty harvest, you go home, you scrub, you rinse, cut it up into little pieces, juice it, clean the equipment, put that away, and an hour later you're like, "That's never gonna happen again." No way, man. No way. It was fun. It was fun to play **Jamba Juice** one time, but I'm retired now. I'm done. You know it's over for the juicer because I put it on top of the fridge with all that weird greasy dust. You know that dust? That's that forever dust. That's not going nowhere. That's gonna be oil one day.	Prendi il raccolto terroso, vai a casa, strofini, lavi, tagli a pezzi, spremi, lavi lo strumento, lo riponi e un'ora dopo dici: "Non lo farò mai più". No, assolutamente. È stato bello giocare allo **smoothie** per una volta, ma ora mi ritiro. Basta. Sai che è finita per l'estrattore perché lo metti sul frigo con tutta quella polvere untuosa. Sapete? Quella polvere millenaria. Non va da nessuna parte, un giorno diventerà olio.

In this case, it was chosen to replace the realia 'Jamba Juice' with 'smoothie'. This decision was likely made to ensure that the audience could understand the humorous instance. Jamba Juice is a popular American company that produces smoothies and blended fruit and vegetable juices, but it is not popular in Italy; therefore, it would not have been recognized by the Italian audience. This translation choice effectively conveys the concept of the joke, allowing the audience to understand the intended humour.

2.2.3 Shared cultural references because of globalization

Today humour spreads faster than it has ever done before, and so do the cultural references employed by comedians in their performances. Indeed, in the context of globalization, individuals are constantly broadening their encyclopaedic knowledge with cultural references which are borrowed first and foremost from the English-speaking world. Thanks to

technological progress and the Internet, people from different parts of the world have now access to the same content and share more and more cultural references. Kids start watching programs filmed in English-speaking countries – particularly in the US – in their early childhood, therefore naturally importing realia such as public figures and popular brands. Such elements tend to transcend geographical boundaries and can be easily understood and appreciated by audiences worldwide, especially when it comes to Western countries. In *Look At You* (Mercado, 2022) the comedian Taylor Tomlison gives a clear example of a shared cultural reference because of globalization, the Internet and the anglophone influence on entertainment. In this part of her Netflix special, Tomlison talks about her experience of finding out she has bipolar disorder and how she initially struggles with accepting it.

Source Text	Netflix Translation
I'm so glad I know that I'm bipolar now. I mean, I have the right meds, I got a mood ring, I'm handling it. But when I first found out, it was a very tough pill to swallow. And I've swallowed a lot of pills. Because when you first find out something like that, you're, like, "Oh man, am I gonna tell anybody? Should I tell anybody? And if I do tell people, am I hot and/or talented enough to be an inspiration?" Like, if I have a thing and someone else has that thing and they find out I have it too, are they gonna feel good or bad with that information? Because when I got diagnosed, they started listing names. They were, like, "You know who else is bipolar? **Selena Gomez**." And I was, like, "That does make me feel better. She is very pretty. Okay, I'll be bipolar."	Ora sono felice di sapere che sono bipolare. Prendo i giusti farmaci, ho l'anello dell'umore, me la sto cavando. Ma quando l'ho scoperto è stata una pillola amara da mandar giù. E di pillole ne ho mandate giù molte. Perché quando scopri una cosa così pensi: "Oddio, lo dirò a qualcuno? Dovrei dirlo a qualcuno? E se lo dico alle persone, sono abbastanza sexy e/o di talento per essere d'ispirazione?" Cioè, se io ho una cosa e qualcun altro ha la stessa cosa e quel qualcuno scopre che ce l'ho anch'io, si sentirà bene o male con quell'informazione? Perché dopo la diagnosi, hanno iniziato a dirmi dei nomi. Tipo: "Sai chi altro è bipolare? **Selena Gomez**." E io: "Questo mi fa stare molto meglio. Lei è molto bella. Ok, sarò bipolare."

Tomlison humorously reflects on her thoughts and concerns, such as whether she can be an inspiration to others telling people about the diagnosis. To normalize her condition and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health conditions, people started telling her other

people's names also known to have the disorder and she eventually finds comfort in the fact that Selena Gomez is among them. Here, Selena Gomez is an example of a shared realia, as her figure is globally recognized because of her Disney background, her popularity on social media platforms and the constant media coverage. Therefore, in this case, there is no "culture bump" as in the target text there are no anomalies resulting from source-cultural names.

In conclusion, the analysis of cultural references in stand-up comedy and their translation reveals the significant role of culture-specificity in the target audience understanding of the intended humour. Translators acknowledge the cruciality of cultural references and their impact on the humour and relatability of the content and use different strategies according to the type of cultural reference they come across. Given the vast landscape of cultural references and the dynamic nature of stand-up comedy, this thesis only attempts to provide a glimpse into the complexities of translating cultural references in stand-up comedy and to highlight the importance of culture in the creation of monologues.

3 LANGUAGE-RELATED TRANSLATION CHALLENGES

3.1 LANGUAGE AND STAND-UP COMEDY

Humour naturally relies on language, and this becomes even more pronounced in stand-up comedy as language serves as the primary tool for comedians to craft their monologues and entertain their audiences. Comedians' jokes are often based on language-play such as puns and wordplays, as well as on the use of idiomatic expressions. The third and final section of this thesis aims to examine the concept of language-bound humour and explore the challenges and strategies associated with its translation.

3.1.1 Translation strategies for language-bound humour

In his famous essay on laughter, Bergson notes that "a comic meaning is invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form" (1914, pp. 112–113). These words effectively capture the essence of stand-up comedy, where comedians create their monologues by manipulating language and inserting unexpected or absurd ideas into phrase-forms that are familiar to their audience. However, some expressions may be humorous in one language but simply absurd when translated into another. When a phrase is translated into another language, the well-established phrase-form may not exist or may have a different meaning. Therefore, the comic effect may not be achieved in the same way as in the source language.

As Nida and Taber (2003, p. 4) argue "Anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the language". Indeed, while it is generally possible to convey the same meaning in different languages, there are certain cases where the form of the language itself is essential to the message, for example when dealing with puns translation. Puns occur when formal similarities or identical elements in a language allow for the expression of multiple distinct meanings. When these elements, along with the co-text, are intentionally arranged to evoke two or more of these distinct meanings at the same time, a pun is formed (Schröter, 2010). Consequently, the meaning of puns – and language-play in general – depends on the specific structure of the language in which they are created and, when transported to another linguistic structure, they can no longer function as puns (Chiaro, 2000). For instance, a pun that relies on a homophone – two words that sound the same but have different meanings – in one language may not work in another language where those words do not sound alike. For this reason, translators often need to find alternative and creative ways to convey the comic effect of linguistic jokes, that is, jokes whose humour has its point in the

clever use of words. According to Chiaro (2010), translators generally choose to apply one of four strategies when dealing with verbal humour:

1. Leave the wordplay unchanged.
2. Replace the verbal humour with a different instance of verbal humour.
3. Replace the verbal humour with an idiomatic expression.
4. Ignoring the wordplay.

These translation strategies are proposed in a wider context of screen translation, but they are also applicable and valid within stand-up comedy translation. The next paragraphs will focus on exploring the challenges presented by language-bound humour taking examples from Jimmy Carr's show on Netflix named *His Dark Material* (Klein, 2021) and Hannah Gadsby's *Douglas* (Parry, 2020).

3.1.1.1 Strategy no. 1: Leave the language-play unchanged

The first strategy mentioned by Chiaro involves keeping the original wordplay intact, allowing the target audience to appreciate the original humorous instance. The translator renders word-for-word the source text utterance, thus inserting an equivalent in Italian, like in the following example taken from *His Dark Material*.

Source Text	Netflix Translation
I like dwarves. You're not meant to say "dwarf" but "little people". I don't like the term "little people". Because "little", bit patronizing. And "people"? Come on, that's a stretch. **Dwarfism is a growing problem**. I had a dwarf come up to me after a show. Not right up to me. Up to about there. He wasn't angry, but he was a little short with me. He was not happy.	A me piacciono i nani. Non si dice "nani", ma "persone piccole". Non mi piace il termine "persone piccole". "Piccole" è condiscendente. E "persone"... Dai, non ci allunghiamo. **Il nanismo è un problema in crescita**. Un nano è venuto da me dopo uno spettacolo. Non proprio da me. Solo fino a qui. Non era arrabbiato, solo a corto di pazienza. Non era contento.

In this bit, Carr humorously addresses the topic of political correctness and the use of appropriate terminology when referring to individuals with dwarfism. The bit is full of language-play examples, which are rendered using different techniques. During the translation process, it was chosen to preserve the original wordplay in the sentence "Dwarfism is a growing problem", in which Carr plays on the double meaning of "growing". On one hand, "growing"

refs to the physical growth of individuals with dwarfism, a medical condition characterized by short stature. On the other hand, the comedian twists the sentence to imply that dwarfism is an increasingly present phenomenon as if it were a social issue. In this case, the comedic effect is perfectly maintained in the literal translation into Italian ("Il nanismo è un problema in crescita"). Nevertheless, a literal rendering of the verbal humour that leaves the wordplay unchanged is not always ideal, because often there are no equivalents between the source and target language. The comedic effect and the playful ambiguity are generally lost in a word-for-word translation.

3.1.1.2 Strategy no. 2: Replace the VH with a different instance of VH

In the frequent cases in which a literal translation of wordplay is not possible due to linguistic differences, translators can choose to replace the source of language-play with an example of language-play in the target language. This is generally the best strategy to adopt, as the recipient manages to experience the instance of verbal humour in the comedian's monologue. Here is an example taken from *Douglas*.

Source Text	Netflix Translation
I've never met a joke that I haven't wanted to call back. **I've never met a joke**… G'day. **I've never meta… Meta joke.** That's a pun. Catch up. Right?	Il fatto è che **almeno metà delle mie battute** meritano un richiamo. **Almeno metà.** Capito? **Almeno "meta". Meta, capito?** È un gioco di parole. Stiamo al passo, ok?

In this part of the special, Hannah Gadsby plays on language with a pun that revolves around the term "meta", which means self-referential. The word "meta" sounds like "made a", therefore creating a pun. In this context, Gadsby is saying that they have never made a joke that they have not wanted to refer to again. By saying "meta joke", the comedians both point out the concept of a joke being "meta" and delivers a punchline that is a meta joke itself. As the pun relies on the similarity in sound between the two expressions, in the Italian translation it was chosen to replace the instance of verbal humour with a different one. When back translating the Italian version, we have a different joke from the original one: "The fact is that at least half of my jokes deserve a call back. At least half. Got it?". In Italian, the use of "half" has a double meaning: it refers both to the number of jokes deserving to be called back (at least half) and the term "meta", which sounds like the Italian word "metà" ("half"). Although the Italian audience does not experience the exact same joke as the live audience of the show, this approach ensures

that they can still appreciate and enjoy the intended humorous effect of the pun in Gadsby's monologue.

3.1.1.3 Strategy no. 3: Replace the verbal humour with an idiomatic expression

Translators can also choose to replace the verbal humour in the source language with an equivalent idiomatic expression in the target language; this strategy is often used in screen translation. While idioms may not be inherently funny, they can similarly enliven the target text to wordplay. This ensures that the translated joke captures the intended comedic effect while connecting with the audience's background, as by incorporating idioms that are familiar to the target audience, the translated joke becomes more relatable and accessible. The following bit taken from Carr's monologue perfectly portrays the difficulties presented by language-bound humour translation.

Source Text	Netflix Translation
I met a girl in the audience with a weird job. Chatting with the audience, this girl, I said, "What do you do?" She said, "I work in marketing." In what? She went, "I'm head of marketing for a prosthetic limbs company." I'd never met an arms dealer before. I said, "You sell used ones? That'd be a second-hand shop." We can all agree. That is a woman robbing a living, right? 'Cause if ever there was a product that requires zero marketing spent, it's prosthetic limbs. What's going on in that showroom? "Can I help you, sir?" "Just browsing, thank you." "I was passing and thought I'd hop in." "It might interest you to learn, there's 50% off right legs." "That's what happened to me." "Maybe I could help you make a decision." "Thanks. **I've been stumped**. **I don't want this to cost me an arm and a leg**."	"Ho conosciuto una ragazza con un lavoro strano. Era nel pubblico, ho detto: "Cosa fai nella vita?" "Mi occupo di marketing." Fa: "Dirigo il marketing di un'azienda che produce protesi." È una trafficante di braccia. Ho detto: "Vendi quelle usate? Sono di seconda... mano." Ma direi che quella donna ruba lo stipendio, no? Perché se c'è una cosa che non ha proprio bisogno di marketing, è una protesi. Come funziona, in quella showroom? "Posso esserle utile?" "Sto solo dando un'occhiata." "Passavo di qua, ho deciso di entrare." "Sappia che le gambe destre le abbiamo dimezzate." "È quello che è successo a me." "Magari posso aiutarla." "**Lei è proprio in gamba**. **Spero che non mi costi un occhio**."

In this part of his monologue, Carr ironizes about the fact that he met a woman who is head of marketing for a prosthetic limbs company. The comedian makes several puns and wordplays, such as calling her an "arms dealer" and joking about a "second-hand shop" for used prosthetic limbs. The punchline of the joke is the absurdity of marketing prosthetic limbs because the products do not require much advertising. While the subtitles in Italian are generally less effective in terms of comedic effect, the translation of the imaginary customer's last reply is quite successful. The translation choice was to replace the verbal humour playing on words with an idiomatic expression. The phrase "I've been stumped" is a pun in this context. In general usage, the phrase means that someone is puzzled or unable to find a solution to a problem. However, in the context of the joke about prosthetic limbs, "stumped" takes on an additional meaning as it can also refer to the part of the limb left after an amputation ("stump"). The translation does not faithfully reflect the source text. Rather, it was chosen to insert an idiomatic expression in the target language that changes the meaning of the original joke, maintaining the humorous effect. While "in gamba" in Italian literally translates as "on the leg", the idiomatic expression "essere in gamba" means to be skilled, efficient or competent in a given area or activity. Therefore, the idiomatic expression fits nicely in the imaginary customer's reply.

3.1.1.4 Strategy no. 4: Ignoring the wordplay

Sometimes, the cultural or linguistic nuances of wordplay may be challenging to replicate in the target language. In such cases, the translator may decide to omit or ignore the wordplay. Although this strategy is frequently used, it might not be ideal in the case of stand-up comedy, because the target audience knows that the source text contained verbal humour, for example from the audience's laughter or the comedian's pause. Most of the time, translators will opt for translating literally the verbal humour in the source text instead of ignoring it altogether. A literal rendering allows the target audience to know that there was a humorous instance in the source text, even if the comedic effect is lost in translation. Also, if the target audience is not completely unfamiliar with the source language, they may be able to infer the language-play.

In closing, going through language-bound humour in stand-up comedy, it has emerged that there are several strategies translators can adopt when dealing with this genre. By using famous comedians' monologues, it has become evident that maintaining the comedic effect across languages is far from simple, and that subtitlers strive to creatively adapt the monologues to preserve the humour and allow the target audience to have a similar comedic experience to the live audience.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, as Gottlieb would put it, any example of translation is an "adaptation of the original message to a culture outside the original speech community" (1994, p. 269). This concept has proven true for the translation of stand-up comedy. The strategies employed when dealing with culturally specific and language-bound humour are the most varied, and all aim to give the Italian audience the experience they would have if they knew English, while always bearing in mind that stand-up comedy performances are inseparable from their live dimension and the comedian's background.

This thesis has examined in detail the realm of stand-up comedy translation from English to Italian, taking into consideration the various challenges and strategies involved in this complex process. Through a thorough analysis of linguistic and cultural elements in stand-up comedy monologues of well-established comedians, the thesis has explored both content-related and language-related translation challenges, presenting the strategies employed by subtitlers to render humour across languages and cultures. In this context, the role of subtitles as conveyors of cultural and linguistic features has appeared crucial in enabling the preservation of the original comedic effect as well as in ensuring accessibility for a wider audience.

Throughout this paper, it has become evident that stand-up comedy is a multifaceted art form that extends beyond mere entertainment. By illustrating the main characteristics of stand-up comedy, such as its reliance on relatability and trust and its nature as a form of rhetorical argument, this thesis has both confirmed the richness of this genre and demonstrated that translating these comedy products is considerably more complicated than it may seem at first glance.

It is important to acknowledge that in the field of humour and translation studies, stand-up comedy translation has not really been considered yet. Indeed, the primary aim of this thesis was to provide an insight into an art and entertainment form that is still an uncharted territory. Through the analysis of several Netflix specials, this thesis has emphasized the importance of creative problem-solving in maintaining the comedic impact while crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries, as well as the influence of language and culture on every individual's sense of humour.

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